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BULLETIN

OF THE

MADRAS GOVERNMENT MUSEUM

EDITED BY THE SUPERINTENDENT

THE GOPURAS OF TIRUVANNAMALAI

By

F.H. GRAVELY, D.Sc., F.N.I.,

Reading, England

NEW SERIES - General Section, Vol.VII, No.3

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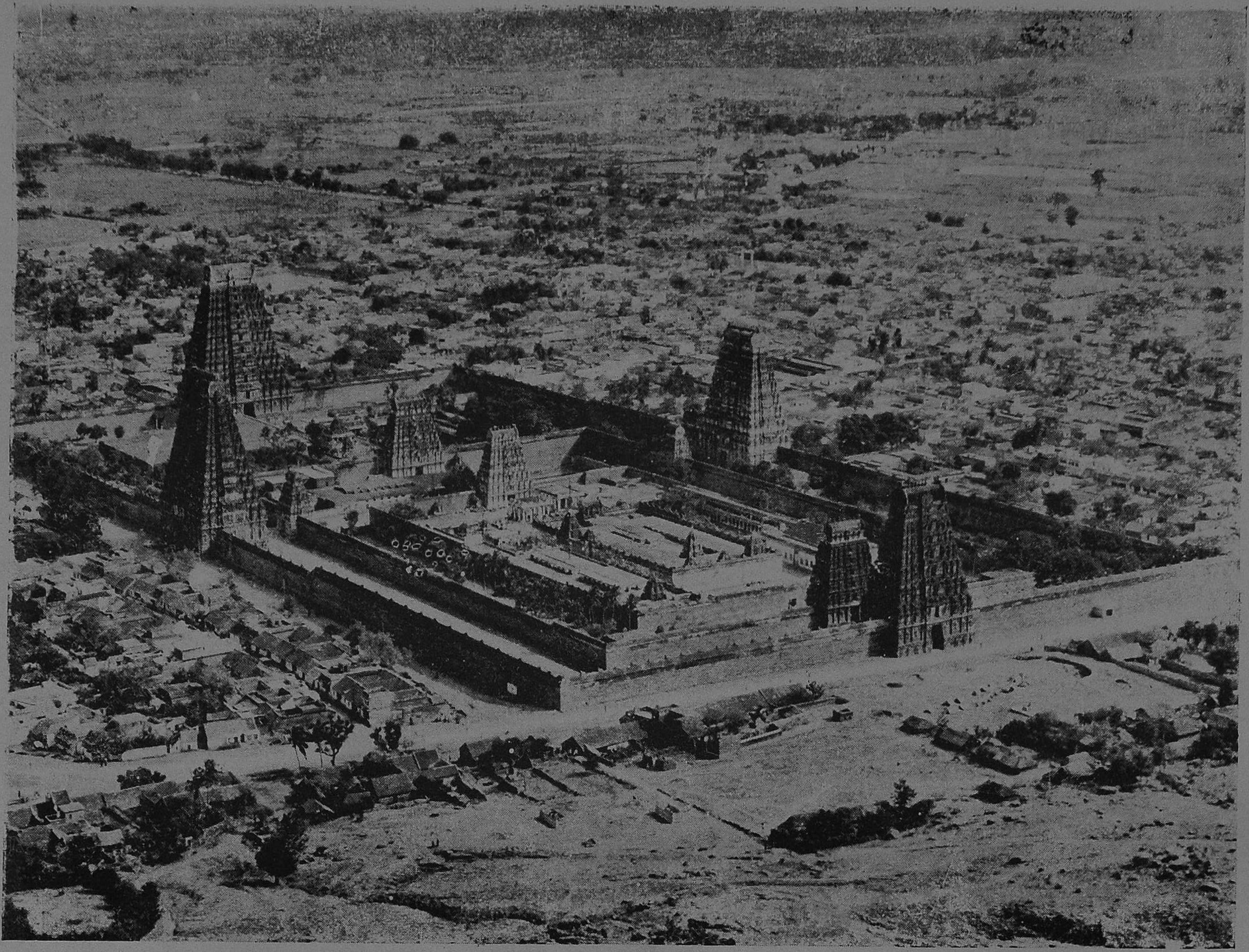
GOVERNMENT OF TAMILNADU

2002



GENERAL VIEW OF TIRUVANNAMALAI TEMPLE.

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THE GOPURAS OF TIRUVANNAMALAI

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FOREWORD

Gopura, the name for the entrance tower of South Indian Hindu Temples, is an imposing architectural feature of the complex of structures that form a temple. In the beginning it was a small structure raised over the passage providing entry into the temple. Such an entrance tower over the gateway in the *Kailasanatha* temple in Kanchipuram is one of the earliest examples of its kind. Inscriptions of Pallava and early Chola periods refer to the *Gopura* as an essential axial adjunct. Some temples of these periods still have *Gopuras* of modest size. The first experiment in the elaboration of the *Gopura* could be seen in the Thanjavur Big Temple where we find an inner and outer *Gopura.* In the next stage of its development *Gopuras* began to dominate the landscape eclipsing the *Vimana* (super structure over the Sanctum) which until then was greater in height than the *Gopura.* Another development is the multiple *Gopura* lay-out in each of the circuits of the temple complex. The *Arunachaleswara* temple at Tiruvannamalai is a pleasing example of this design. The *Gopuras* of this famous temple captivated former Superintendent of this Museum Dr. F.H. Gravely so much as to make him devote his time and energy to writing about them even after his retirement from service in the museum. Nearly a decade after his retirement in 1940 AD, Dr. F.H. Gravely wrote this small monograph on the *Gopuras* of Tiruvannamalai temple. He has demonstrated in this work the successive changes of styles that have occurred in the construction of the *Gopura,* from about 11th century AD to 19th century AD.

This book remains a key to understanding the evolution of *Gopuras* even today. We feel happy to bring out this work under our scheme of reprinting rare and old Museum Publications.

CHENNAI-600 008
15-3-2002 AD

(Dr.R.Kannan, Ph.D., I.A.S.)

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THE GOPURAS OF TIRUVANNAMALAI

CHOLA, VIJAYANAGARA AND MODERN PERIODS.

By F. H. Gravely.

The decoration applied to temples of the Tamil country shows a general increase of elaboration as time advances. But during the Vijayanagar period this tendency is temporarily yet most strikingly reversed. Since the gopuras of the Arunachala temple at Tiruvannamalai would naturally have been built in succession beginning with that of the innermost court and ending with those of the outermost, it occurred to me long ago that they ought to throw light on the details of what occurred and as I was unable to revisit them myself I tried to obtain photographs. These were supplied to me by Miss Ella Maillart, H.R.H. Prince Peter of Greece and Dr. Mees, whom I take this opportunity of thanking for their help.

When I first received these photographs I was utterly perplexed and had to put them aside without achieving anything, for among the gopuras with a moderate amount of figure sculpture I found myself unable to tell which immediately preceded and which immediately succeeded those with none or almost none. Niches in the latter, however, though they have lost the function for which they were invented, instead of being omitted tend to be reduced till they become more or less slit-like and in this form continue to be used in the same context as before as a means of breaking up flat surfaces. Eventually I noticed that this form of niche appears in more modern gopuras in places where even the modern decorator feels that he cannot crowd in another figure. The absence or presence of such slit-like niches can therefore be used to distinguish gopuras of the time preceding the reduction of images from those of later times, and with this clue there is no serious difficulty in arranging the Tiruvannamalai gopuras in their proper chronological order. My object now is to put the facts on record and to demonstrate the successive changes of style that they illustrate from about 1063—1810 A.D. and about a century beyond, i.e., from about the time of transition from the Early to the Late Chola period till quite modern times. Since I am no longer in India I am unable to check by observation in the temple what I have deduced from the photographs, but Mr. C. Sivaramamurti of the Archæological Survey of India has been good enough to visit Tiruvannamalai for this purpose, and to supply me with dates and references to inscriptions of which I should otherwise have remained in ignorance. Dr. P. V. Pathy has taken a further series of photographs required for illustrations, those on which the work was done having proved unsuitable for this further purpose. And Mr. J. C. Harle has also helped me. To them too, therefore, I give most sincere thanks. I am confident that the paper gives a correct general account of the successive

changes that have taken place in the decoration of these gopuras and I hope that it will provide a basis for further study of the subject by others, not only at Tiruvannamalai but in temples of Tamilian style generally, and that any slips that I may have made will thus be corrected.

The plaster covering the upper part of a temple tower has necessarily to be renewed periodically; so there is always a danger that the original features will be lost, as has obviously happened in the case of the two oldest gopuras at Tiruvannamalai, and sometimes this part may even prove to have been entirely rebuilt. Fortunately in such buildings tradition dies hard, and I have seen at least one temple in which plastered features have retained their original (Pallava) character for over a thousand years. With the exception of the two oldest, all the Tiruvannamalai towers appear still to be very much as they were originally built and so, I believe, are the towers of many other ancient South Indian temples, though changes are now apt to be made more readily. May full descriptions and illustrations of all those of importance be recorded before it is too late.

The Tiruvannamalai temple consists primarily of three courts, one inside another, with gopuras facing the cardinal points (*see Frontispiece*). The innermost court has only a single gopura situated as one would expect at its eastern end. The other eight gopuras it will be convenient to distinguish as the north, south, east and west gopuras of the middle and outer courts respectively. Their design indicates the following as the order in which they were built, this being confirmed by the dates given in inscriptions

First the innermost gopura, known locally as the *kili* or parrot gopura, was built about 1063 A.D. by Vira Rajendra whose usual royal *biruda* was Maharaja Tribhuvana Chakravartigal, the title under which this gopura is ascribed to him by local tradition. Next the gopuras of the middle court, with the exception of the spire of the western one, were built by the Hoysala king Ballala III (known locally as " Vellala Maharaja ") after whom the eastern and largest of the three gopuras was named—or perhaps by one of his generals whose inscriptions record as having made gifts to the temple about 1340 A.D. The earliest inscription on the Vellala gopura is dated 1377 A.D. Tradition ascribes the western gopura of this court—known locally as the *melgopura* or tall gopura—to the same builder or some one a little later, which seems to be confirmed by the fact that it bears an inscription of 1388 and by the style of its base. But the spire is obviously much later, being in the style of Krishnadevaraya whose inscriptions of about 1516 A.D. in the 1,000-pillared mandapa record his additions and renovations. It was presumably built by him when he undertook the gopuras of the outer court, the bases of all four of which are ascribed to him. The base of the western one is in his style and I see no reason to doubt that he constructed it; but the others seem to me to be too ornate for his taste and may not improbably I think

prove to be somewhat later. The order in which these bases seem to have been built is west, south, east, north. Of their spires the eastern, as would be expected, seems to be the oldest but seems slightly more recent than the spire of the western gopura of the middle court, which is in agreement with the tradition that it was completed by Sevappa Nayak of Tanjore whose inscription there is dated 1690 A.D. Tradition says that the south spire was added a little later, the western one about 1740 and the northern one by Bhakta Ammaniammal about 1810, and style seems to confirm this sequence. Finally the spires of the east gopura of the middle court and of the single gopura of the innermost court have been completely restored in most modern style.

The main features of the gopuras, either as complete units or base and spire separately where these are considerably separated in date, must now be described in chronological order.

Innermost gopura, base only. Ca. 1063 A.D.

Though apparently built towards the close of the Early Chola period, its corbels are of a definitely more advanced type than the Later Chola corbels at Chidambaram, which retain the geometrical simplicity of the Early Chola corbels of the Tanjore vimana with the median projection an unmodified right-angled triangle. In this gopura (Pl. I), where they are less advanced than in any other at Tiruvannamalai, the median projection becomes more of a cube than at Tanjore and Chidambaram by the cutting back of the hypotenuse of the triangle, but the " cube " thus formed is constructed by a horizontal band just above the middle while its free horizontal lower surface bears lotus ornamentation (Pl. II*a*). In many of the gopuras the ornament on either side of the gateway has received specially generous treatment, and in the corbels over the pillars next to the gateway of this one the projections already show the beginnings of the curve of their later characteristic form.

The swollen base of the vase ornament is smooth as in Tanjore and Chidambaram, not fluted as in the other Tiruvannamalai gopuras. The top of the vase bears a capital surmounted by corbels with the usual pair of lateral lotus projections but without the usual forward one. No niche is present, the wall between each pair of pillars being flat. In the Tanjore temple the base of the vimana bears two equal rows of niches, pillars and vase ornaments, with an animal frieze in high relief below, between and above them. In the Chidambaram gopuras the lower course is reduced in height and crowded with niches and other ornamentation, in contrast with which and with the still more ornate spire the upper course stands out by reason of its spaciousness and comparative simplicity, while only the uppermost of the animal friezes is present. On the Tiruvannamalai innermost gopura the lower course is still further reduced in height, and its decoration to a series of upright flattened bands in moderate relief (Pl. I).

Eastern (base only), northern and southern gopuras, middle court. Ca. 1340 A.D.

On the bases of these three gopuras the animal frieze has disappeared and the small lowest course remains plain as in the gopura of the innermost court; but in the upper course a niche is added on either side to the other decorations, while the lotus form of the corbel projections is somewhat more developed than even on the corbels besides the gateway of the innermost gopura, and the vase ornament base is fluted with a plain raised band round its widest part. In the small northern and southern gopuras of this court the corbels over the pillars beside the gateway and at the corners have all three of the usual lotus projections (Pl. III), but the others have the lateral pair only and are levelled off in front as they are also in those over the vase ornaments (but not in those over the pillars) of the eastern ones. There are no vase ornaments on the northern one and on the southern one each is surmounted by a pavilion ornament instead of by corbels.

In Tanjore all the niches are of equal importance and are surmounted by a *kudu*, a form of ornament derived from a horseshoe-shaped window. In Chidambaram the chief niche, near the middle of the frontage on each side of the gateway, is much broader than the others and is surmounted by the rectangular form of pavilion ornament, only the subsidiary niches being surmounted by a kudu. All the gopuras of the middle court at Tiruvannamalai are smaller than those at Chidambaram [1], and the chief niche alone is present. In the northern and southern gopuras the pavilion ornament surmounting this niche is of the square type, in the eastern rectangular—as it is in the western gopura also. The northern and southern (Pl. IV) gopuras of this court are the smallest in the temple and the main decorative course on their bases has the simplest plan, the frontage on either side of the gateway being as usual set forwards a little immediately beside it but extending in a single plane beyond this with pillars and, when present, vase ornaments in simple relief upon it. In all other gopuras in the temple the niche, with a strip of wall on either side of it and the pillars flanking this, stands forwards while the portions of the wall bearing vase ornaments are correspondingly sunk back. In this and in its whitewashed pillars and particularly smooth-looking plastered walls, the east goupura of this court differs from the northern and southern ones and resembles the adjacent gopura of the innermost court, suggesting at first sight that these two are more or less contemporaneous and the others late. But its corbels (Pl. V), are definitely more advanced in form than those of the innermost gopura and the more I look into the matter the more I am driven to the conclusion that these similarities of appearance are deceptive, and that it really belongs, as tradition asserts, with other gopuras of the middle court. The pillars on either side of its niches are particularly eloborate.

[1] In Tanjore the ornamentation used in these comparisons is on the *vimana*.

The spire of the eastern gopura of the middle as of the innermost court is obviously modern, but those of the northern and southern are early and appear to be more or less contemporaneous with their bases as tradition seems to imply. Rectangular pavilion ornaments alternate with more slender ones presumably derived from the square type. The former mostly bear three figures each, the latter one (P. III *b*). Though the figures have burst out of their niche their headdresses reach scarcely if at all above the basal part of the pavilon, except in the case of the dvarapalakas on either side of the central line of windows.

Western gopura, middle court. Base a little later than 1340 A.D., spire about 1516 A.D.

The base of this gopura is very like that of the three just described, especially the eastern one. But the lotus projections of its corbels are definitely more prominent (Pl. VI) suggesting that it was the last gopura of this court to be constructed, as tradition asserts. The vase ornaments are surmounted by a pair of corbels only, the median one being absent. With the completion of the base further building seems to have stopped for the time being.

The spire of this gopura would therefore naturally be the first addition which Krishnadevaraya would take in hand when he started work on the temple. Its vertical lines of pavilion ornaments (Pl. VII *a*) above the niches on the base are of rectangular type. But on either side of these are lines of the square type of pavilion ornament with niches of the narrow and even slitlike type characteristic of the Vijayanagar period. All trace of plaster seems to have disappeared, so it is impossible now to tell just what the ornamentation was like, but the brickwork suggests that if at all elaborate it must have been very like that of Vellore with the window ornaments of the pavilion roofs comparatively small and the style generally restrained and severe. And comparison with the similar looking but much later spire of the eastern gopura of the outer court even suggests that the plastering may have been so simple and severe that it looked very much as the brickwork looks to-day without its plaster.

West outer gopura, base. *Ca.* 1516 A.D.

The bases of all gopuras of the outer court are ascribed to Krishnadevaraya, but only this one seems to be in accordance with his taste. I therefore conclude that he planned them all and built this base while building the spire of the west gopura of the middle court which is close by, instead of starting at once on the base of the eastern gopura as might have been expected.

The corbels seem to differ little if at all from those of the adjacent west middle gopura; but all he niches are narrow and empty (Pl. VII *b*) the smallest of them very narrow indeed, as in other gopuras of the king by whom this one is said to have been built.

Structure thus confirms tradition and shows this base to be roughly contemporaneous with the spire of the west middle gopura, and considerably later than its base. The vase ornaments seem to support pavilions, probably square. But the greatest difference between this base and the earlier and much smaller bases of the middle court gopuras lies in the presence in its lower course of pillars and niches (both primary and secondary), such as occur in slightly different form in the gopuras at Chidambaram, gopuras which it may be pointed out are of comparable size, not small as in the middle court here. The vase ornaments found at Chidambaram are not, however, present. In the upper course, too, subsidiary niches appear surmounted by kudu with yali finial, and the vase ornament nearest the gateway is replaced by a pillar supporting a small pavilion ornament.

The spire is evidently later than the base as traditionally believed.

South outer gopura, base. Apparently somewhat later than the western base.

This, like the bases of the eastern gopuras of the two inner courts, has a distinctive appearance on account of the way in which it is coloured, though here the pillars, etc., are dark and the walls light instead of the reverse, and the colouring seems to be confined to the inner (northern) side. It is the narrowest of all the gopuras of the outer court and with the eastern and northern gopuras of this court, differs from the western one in having a yali above the frontal lotus projection (Pl. VIII) of each of the corbel clusters of its upper course, and in having their lotus centres somewhat more prominent. The vase ornaments support kudus with yali-faced finials. Some of the niches are definitely wider than in the western gopura of this court. The spire, as in the western gopura is later than the base.

Eastern outer gopura, base. Apparently somewhat later than the southern base.

The rows of petals in the corbel lotuses of the upper course (Pl. IX) are more widely separated than in the south gopura. The scrolls on either side of the bases of the vase ornaments are more widely separated from them than in the gopuras already described. Many of the niches contain images, particularly in the upper course, but Dr. Mees tells me that they have been inserted " obviously a little later or much later ".

North outer gopura, base. Apparently somewhat later than the eastern base.

The corbel lotuses (Pl. X *a*) are somewhat more elaborate than those of the east gopura of this court, and the objects surmounting the vase ornaments and the pillar by which these are placed on either side of the gateway are supported by yalis as at Vellore—a feature already foreshadowed in the lower course of the Chidambaram gopuras. The bases of the vase ornaments are flanked by elaborated scrolls and the main niches by elaborate relief decoration. The main niches are surmounted by the rectangular type of pavilion ornaments, the others by kudus.

East outer gopura, spire. Ca. 1690 A.D.

This spire is said to have been finished by Sevappa Nayak of Tanjore about 1690. In its bare severity it resembles the western spire of the middle court which seems to have been erected over 150 years earlier, but this resemblance proves to be somewhat deceptive. Both these spires appear at first sight to be more or less devoid of plaster, but a closer examination shows that very little brickwork is actually exposed in this one so we may presume that originally the earlier one was plastered in the same severe manner and looked very much as it does now. In spite of its severity, however, the decoration of this spire proves to be definitely more elaborate than that of the earlier one. On the pavilion ornament bases (Pl. XI) the narrow niches are flanked by more numerous and more elaborate pillars. On the roofs of the forward standing pavilions the kudus are much larger, occupying the whole height except on those at the corners, and flanked on the large rectangular ones by a subsidiary pair. In addition, the spaces between the roofs of these pavilions are occupied by miniature barrel roofs, each with a pair of kudus occupying their full height.

South outer gopura, spire. Probably some date between those of the eastern and western spires.

This looks the most modern of all the four spires of the outer court, because of the heaviness of its plastering and the bursting of its figures out of their background. Tradition says, however, that it was built next after the spire of the great eastern gopura, and certain features seem to confirm this and to indicate that its appearance of modernity are due to changes introduced during some restoration of its plaster. These indications that it may be older than the western and northern spires are the restriction of figures to the lowest row of pavilion ornaments, some even of these being without them, and the height of the dvarapalakas on either side of the central window of this storey, above which they scarcely reach.

West outer gopura, spire. Ca. 1516 A.D.

Said to have been built in 1740. The dvarapalakas are considerably taller than the windows they stand beside and are present on each storey from bottom to top, together with smaller figures in front of the niches of all the principal (rectangular) pavilions (Pl. X b) as well as of all the niches of the bottom storey and the niches of corner pavilions of other stories near the bottom. In general appearance this spire closely resembles the pre-Vijayanagar spires of the much smaller northern and southern gopuras of the middle court, from which it differs chiefly in the presence of empty slit-like niches on either side of the principal pavilion ornament of each storey and in the great enlargement of the kudu of the pavilion on the outer side of this one. There is no room on this spire for a pair to this pavilion on its inner side.

North outer gopura, spire. Ca. 1740 A.D.

Said to have been constructed by the bhakta Ammaniammal about 1810. Very like the west outer gopura but larger, with the principal pavilion of each storey flanked on either side by narrower pavilions the roofs of which are completely covered and hidden by their greatly enlarged kudus.

Eastern gopura of middle court, spire. Obviously recent.

All niches completely hidden by masses of plaster figures except right at the top, a second row of these being introduced on each storey along the bases of the pavilion ornament roofs All kudus very large and extremely ornate (Pl. XII).

Gopura of innermost court, spire. Most recent of all.

This is even more extravagantly decorated than the last, the roofs of the pavilion ornaments being completely obscured by the enlargement of their row of figures and by their large and elaborate kudus (Pl. XIII).

PLATES.

PLATE I.

Innermost gopura base.

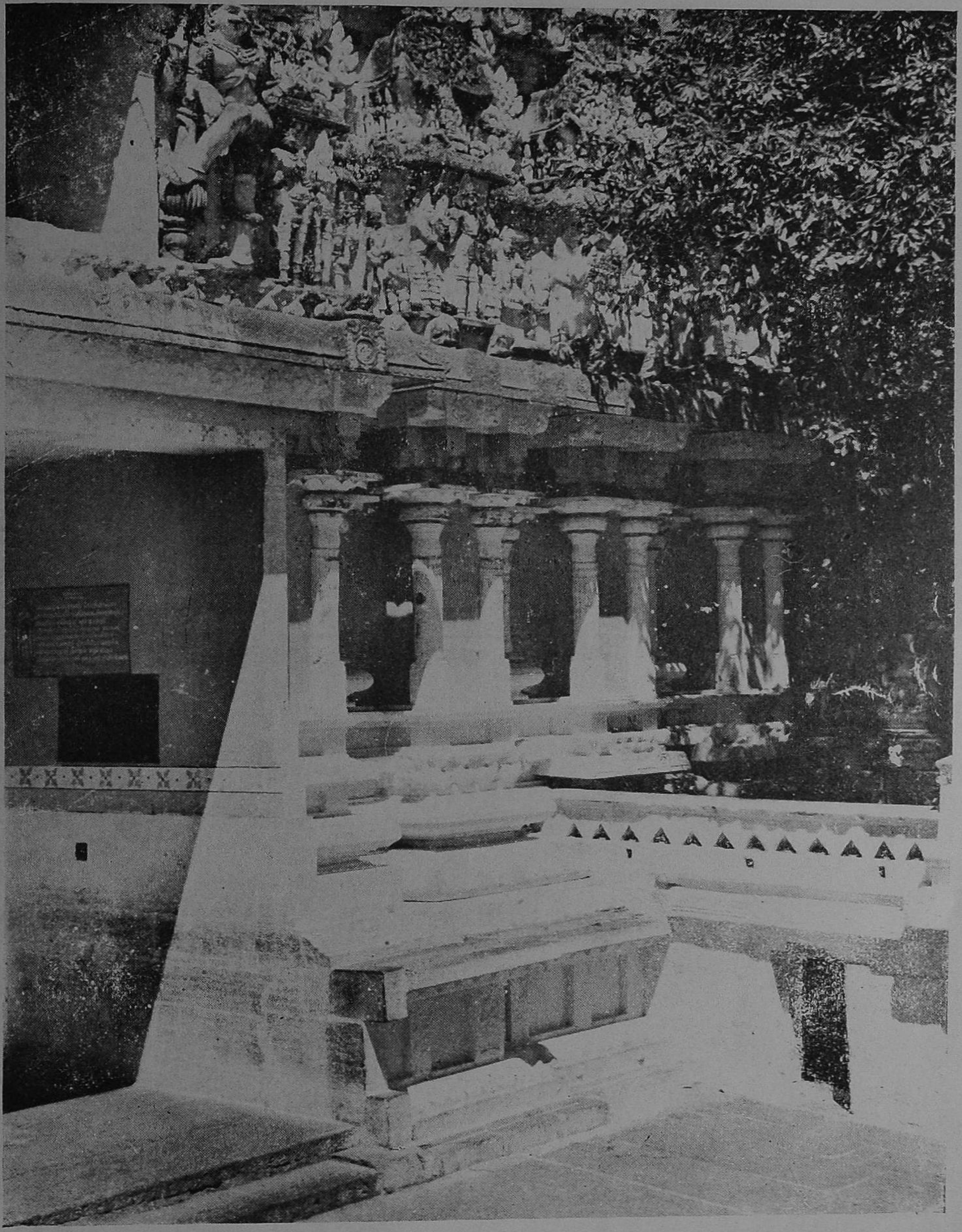

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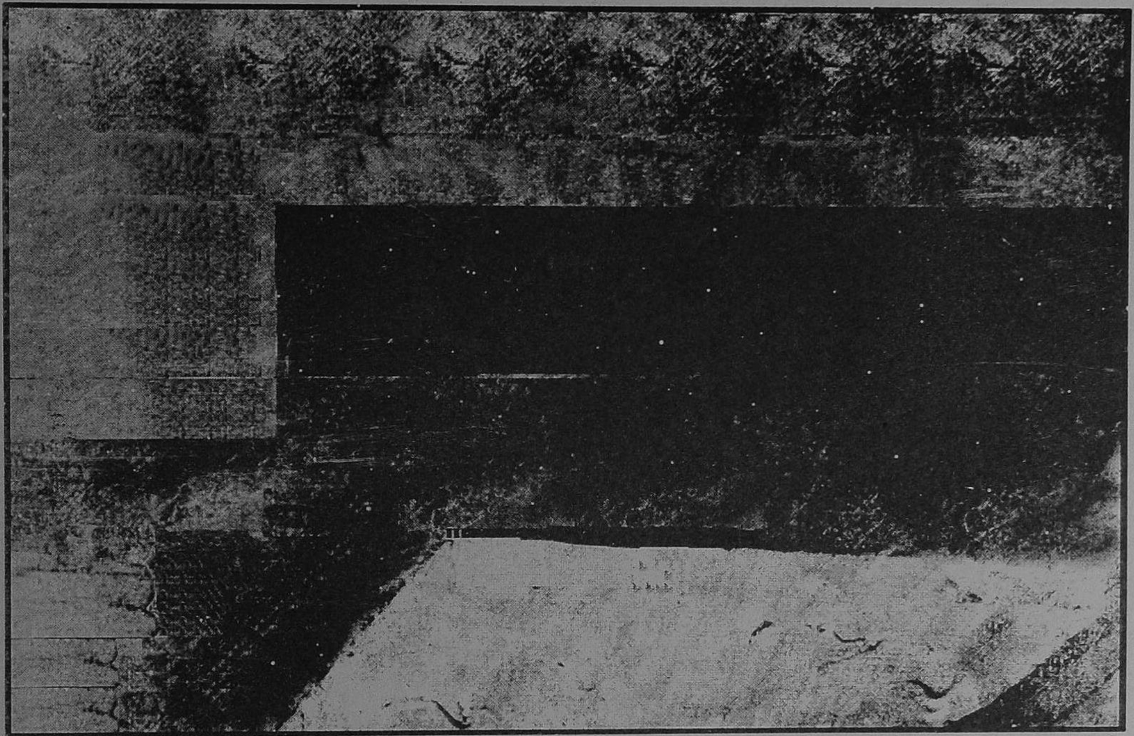
PLATE II.

a. Typical corbel from the base of innermost gopura.

b. Pavilion with three figures and with single figure from south gopura, middle court.



b

PLATE III.

Base of south gopura, middle court.

PLATE IV.

South gopura, middle court, complete view.

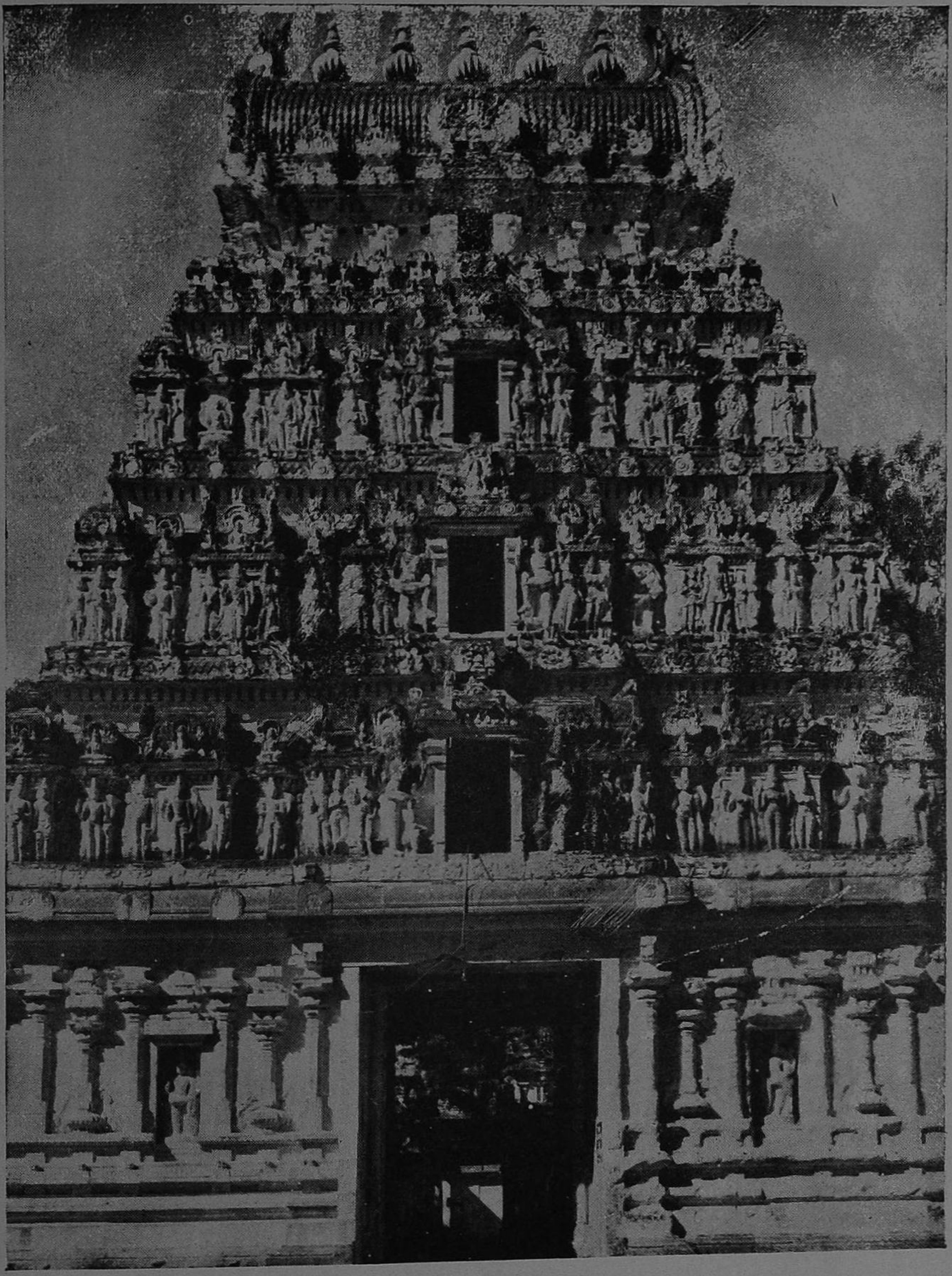


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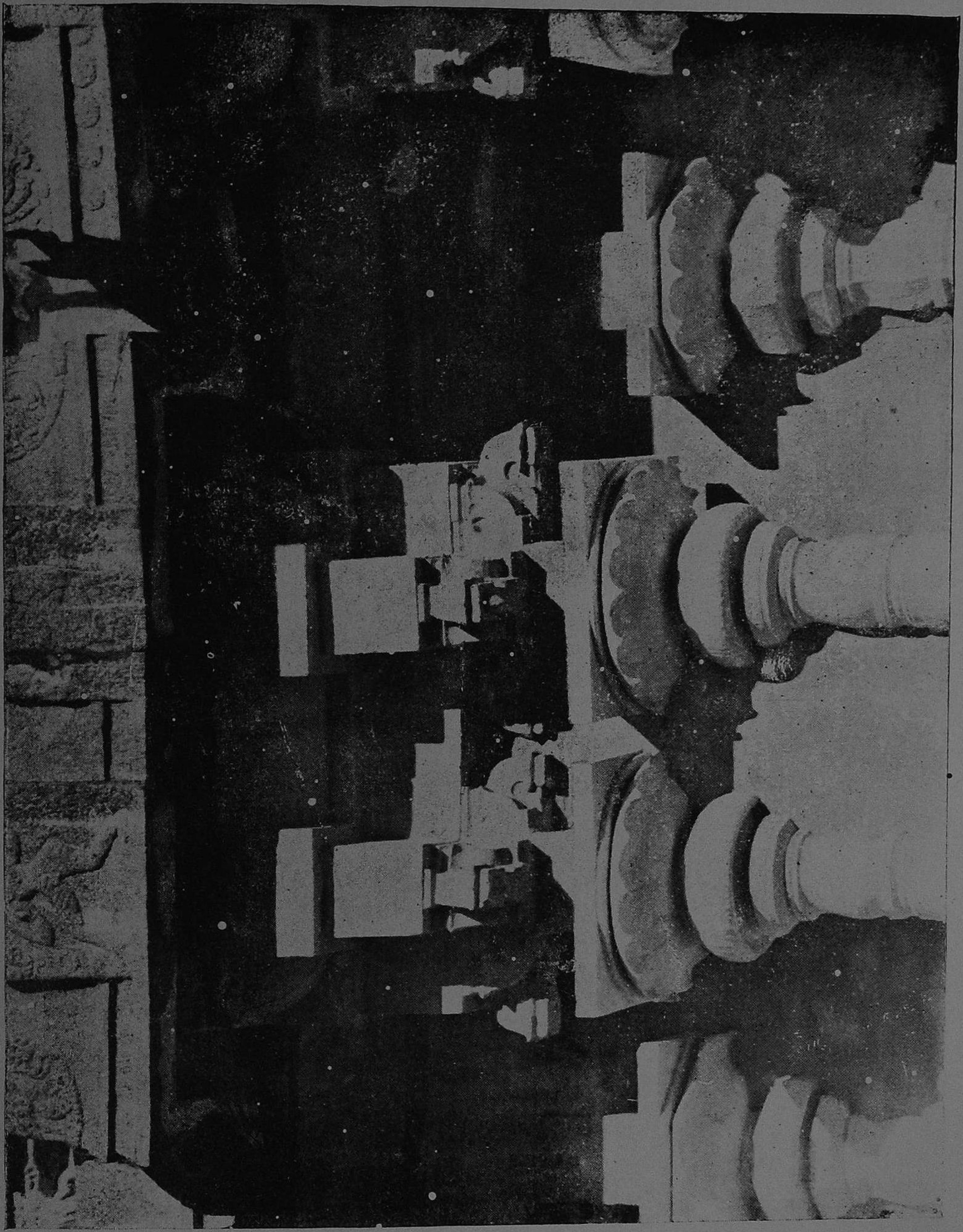
PLATE V.

Typical corbels from east gopura, middle court.



3A

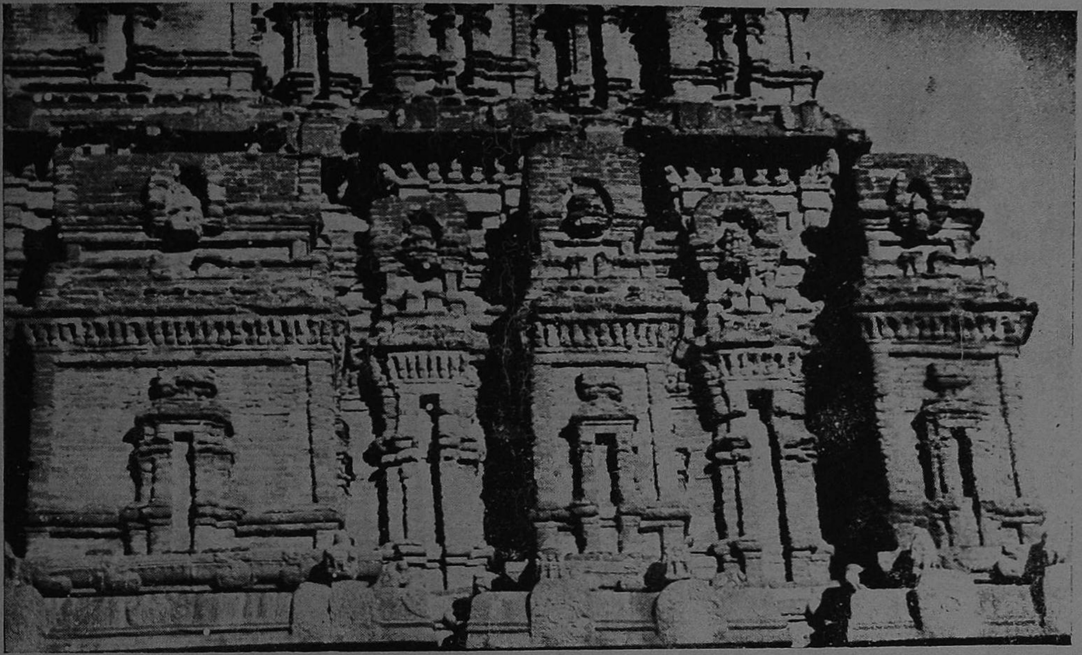
PLATE VI.

Pillars with corbels from west gopura, middle court.

PLATE VII.

a. Pavilions and niches of spire, west gopura, middle court.

b. Base of west outer gopura.



a

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PLATE VIII.

Yali brackets over corbels from south outer gopura.

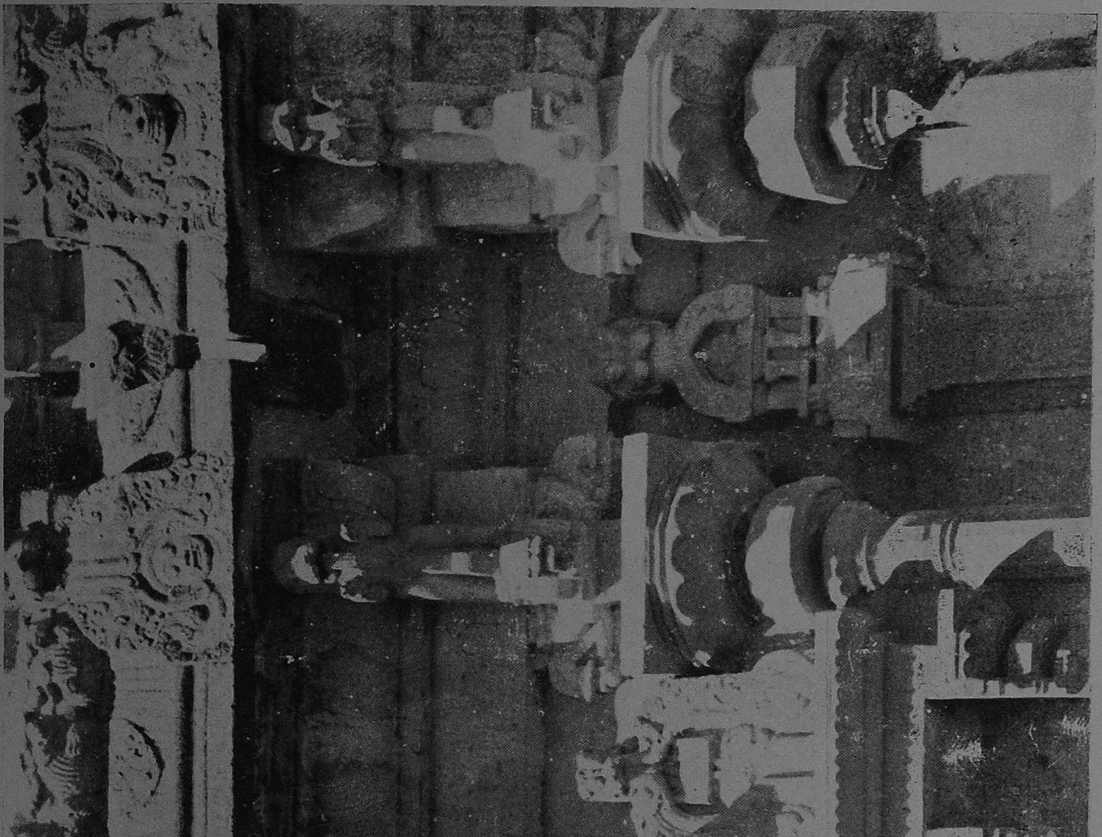

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PLATE IX.

Pillars with corbels, east outer gopura.

PLATE X.

a. Pillars with corbels, north outer gopura.

b. Pavilions and niches of spire, north outer gopura.

a

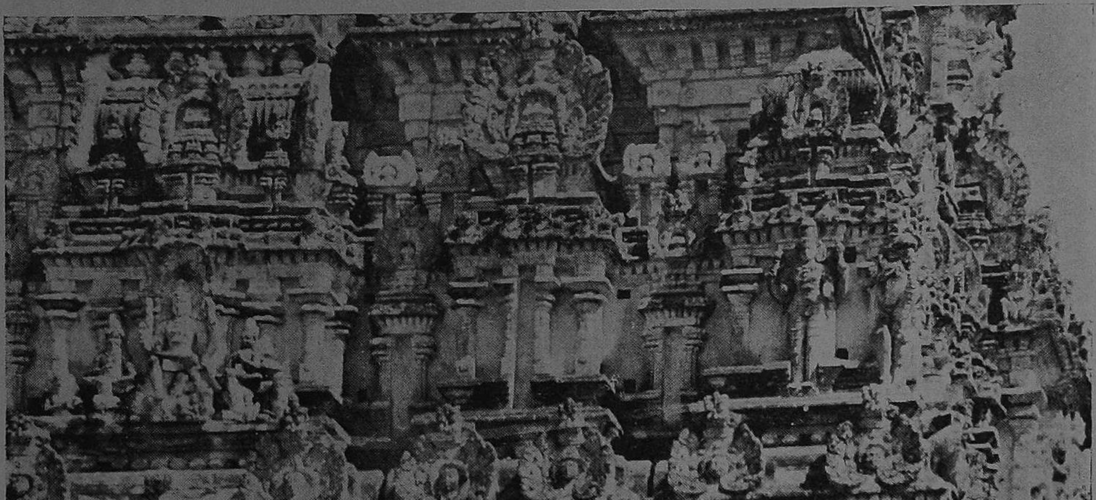
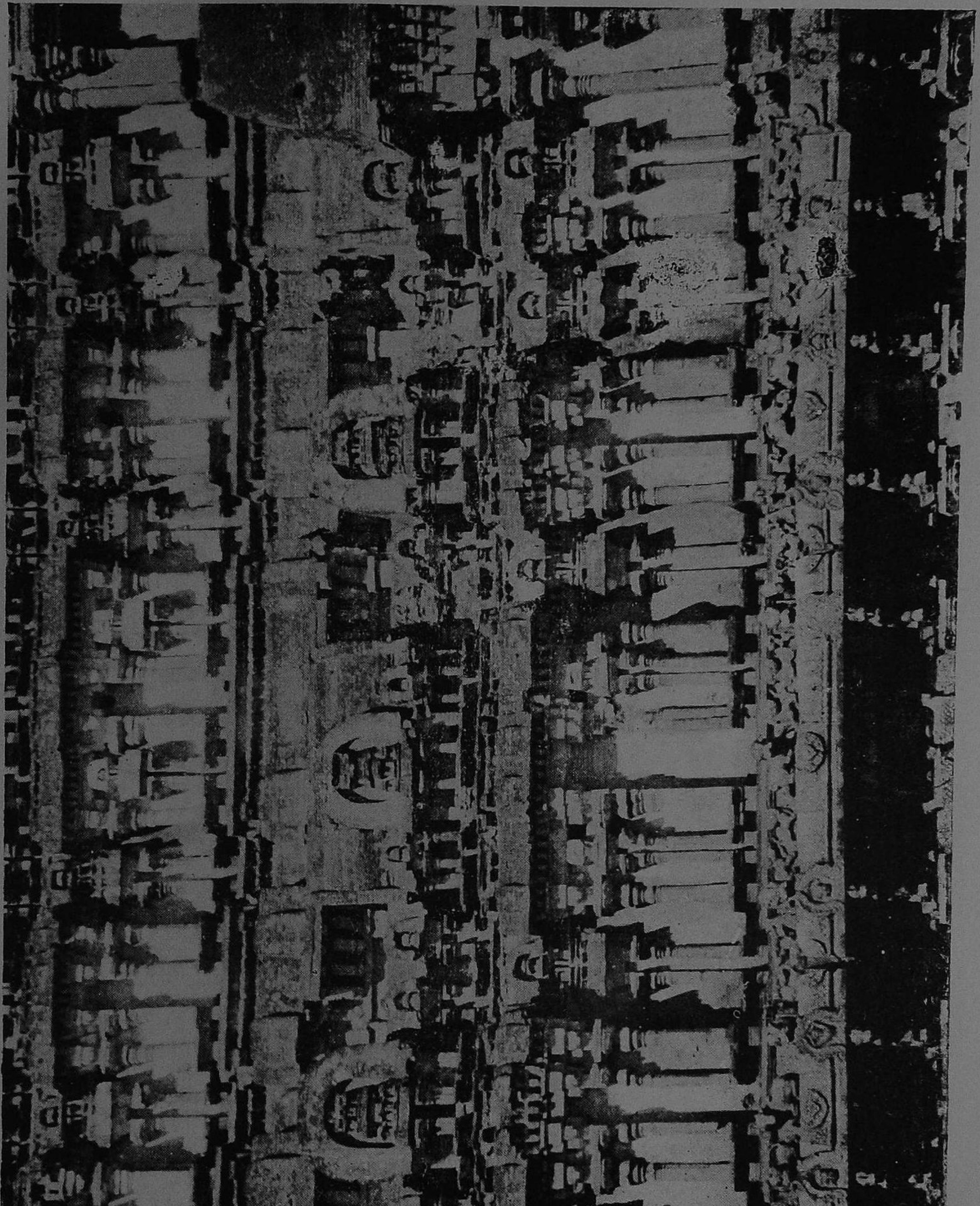


PLATE XI.

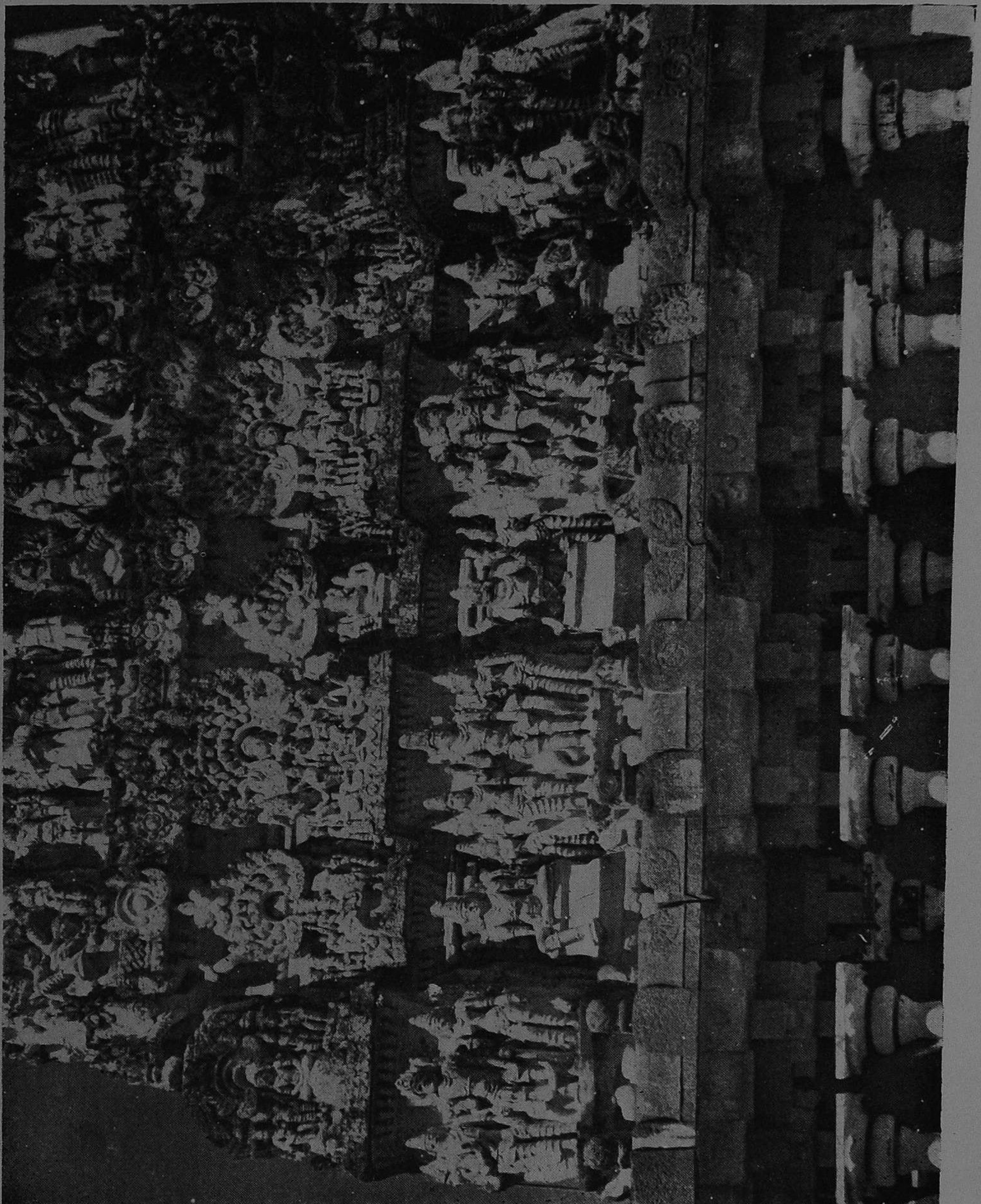
Pavilions and niches of spire, east outer gopura.



5A

PLATE XII.

Pavilions and niches of spire, east gopura, middle court.

PLATE XIII.

Pavilions and niches of spire, innermost gopura.